Executive Summary

Introduction

The Yosemite Valley Loop Road is a historic feature in Yosemite National Park, first built as a stage coach road in 1872. The initial pavement was laid in 1909, and culverts were first installed a year later beneath stretches of Southside Drive. Spot repairs have been made along the roadway as required over time. However, much-needed, comprehensive maintenance and repair of the roadway and associated drainage structures has not been performed for many decades.

Since 1980, annual visitation to Yosemite National Park has averaged 3.4 million people, 95% of which is focused in Yosemite Valley. Dramatic scenery, the Merced Wild and Scenic River, and diverse recreational opportunities draw visitors to the Valley year round, making it one of the most heavily developed areas of the park. As a result, the Yosemite Valley Loop Road experiences the heaviest traffic volumes of any area in Yosemite National Park. Automobiles make up the majority of the volume, but tour buses and public transportation vehicles also contribute to Yosemite Valley traffic. Bus transportation in Yosemite National Park includes regional public transportation, charter and tour bus operators, concessioner-operated tours, and shuttle bus services provided by the park concessioner. With the exception of shuttle bus services in Tuolumne Meadows and between the Mariposa Grove and Wawona, nearly all park buses travel to, from, and within Yosemite Valley.

Purpose and Need

The purpose of this project is to repair and resurface existing roadway pavement, rehabilitate or replace adjacent drainage features (e.g., culverts, diversion ditches, and headwalls) and improve the condition of adjacent roadside parking along approximately 12.5 miles of the Yosemite Valley Loop Road in Yosemite Valley. No roadway widening (outside of the original road prism width of 22 feet), realignment, or changes to vehicular or pedestrian circulation patterns as called for in the *Final Yosemite Valley Plan Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement* (NPS 2000a) [herein referred to as the *Yosemite Valley Plan*], will be undertaken.

The need for this project is evidenced by the fact that the existing road surface and associated drainage features are in poor condition because major maintenance repairs have not been undertaken for many years. Numerous existing culverts are undersized, in disrepair, and/or ineffectively located to capture peak seasonal run-off (refer to figure I-3 in Chapter I). In addition, informal roadside parking along stretches of the Yosemite Valley Loop Road presents visitor safety and resource impact concerns.

Relationship to Other Plans

The proposed project is not tiered to the *Yosemite Valley Plan* (NPS 2000a), and does not implement specific actions called for in the *Yosemite Valley Plan*. However, the Yosemite Valley Loop Road Project area does fall within the Merced Wild and Scenic River corridor, as defined in the *Merced Wild and Scenic River Revised Comprehensive Management Plan* (NPS 2005b) [herein referred to as the *Revised Merced River Plan*]. As such, the proposed project will be subject to the

requirements of the *Revised Merced River Plan*, to the extent that its potential effects coincide with the Merced Wild and Scenic River corridor.

Overview of the Alternatives

The Yosemite Valley Loop Road Project Environmental Assessment presents and analyzes three alternatives. The No Action Alternative represents continuing the existing operation and maintenance of the Yosemite Valley Loop Road. The two action alternatives represent a reasonable range of options to satisfy the purpose of and need for the project, while also meeting all relevant legal requirements. Each of the action alternatives aims to achieve the goals of this project, but varies in how to improve the Yosemite Valley Loop Road. An overview of each alternative, along with a list of Actions Common to All Action Alternatives is presented in table ES-1.

The National Park Service has identified Alternative 2, Rehabilitation of and Improvements to the Roadway, Drainages, and Roadside Parking, as the preferred alternative. This alternative succeeds in protecting sensitive natural and cultural resources, enhancing the visitor experience, and complying with the mandates of the *Revised Merced River Plan*.

Environmental Analysis

Chapter III of this document presents the Affected Environment and the Environmental Consequences for the Yosemite Valley Loop Road Environmental Assessment, which fulfills the requirements of the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) and the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA). The Affected Environment section of Chapter III describes the existing conditions of the area affected by the alternatives described in Chapter II, and the Environmental Consequences section of Chapter III analyzes the environmental effects associated with each of the alternatives. Table II-3 in Chapter II presents a summary comparison of the Environmental Consequences for each alternative.

Environmentally Preferable Alternative

The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations implementing NEPA and the National Park Service NEPA guidelines require that "the alternative or alternatives which were considered to be environmentally preferable" be identified (CEQ Regulations, Section 1505.2). Environmentally preferable is defined as "the alternative that will promote the national environmental policy as expressed in NEPA's Section 101. Ordinarily, this means the alternative that causes the least damage to the biological and physical environment; it also means the alternative that best protects, preserves, and enhances historic, cultural, and natural resources" (CEQ 1981).

Section 101 of NEPA states that:

> *"It is the continuing responsibility of the Federal Government to … (1) fulfill the responsibilities of each generation as trustee of the environment for succeeding generations; (2) assure for all Americans safe, healthful, productive, and aesthetically and culturally pleasing surroundings; (3) attain the widest range of beneficial uses of the environment without degradation, risk to health or safety, or*

> *other undesirable and unintended consequences; (4) preserve important historic, cultural, and natural aspects of our national heritage, and maintain, wherever possible, an environment which supports diversity, and variety of individual choice; (5) achieve a balance between population and resource use which will permit high standards of living and a wide sharing of life's amenities; and (6) enhance the quality of renewable resources and approach the maximum attainable recycling of depletable resources."*

Upon full consideration of the elements of Section 101 of NEPA, Alternative 2 represents the Environmentally Preferable Alternative for the Yosemite Valley Loop Road Project. This conclusion is analyzed in detail in Chapter II.

Consultation and Coordination Process

The National Park Service initiated public scoping for the proposed Yosemite Valley Loop Road Project for a 30-day period beginning on May 2, 2005 and accepted scoping comments through June 1, 2005. During this period, the National Park Service also made available to the public the 30% Design Drawings for this project at the May 2005 Open House, hosted at the Auditorium in Yosemite Valley. The public was encouraged to submit scoping comments identifying key issues and potential alternatives that could be evaluated as part of the environmental analysis for this project. During the scoping period, 11 public comment letters were received.

Public scoping comments were reviewed and analyzed using the park's Comment Analysis and Response Database (CARD) system. Similar comments were grouped together and a *concern statement* was generated, which captured the main points expressed by the scoping comments. The National Park Service planning team then prepared responses to each concern statement, presenting the National Park Service's reasoning as to how concerns are incorporated into the planning process.

The Public Scoping Comment and Response Report prepared for the Yosemite Valley Loop Road Project can be reviewed online at www.nps.gov/yose/planning. To request a printed copy, call 209-379-1365.

The public outreach called for in Section 106 of NHPA was integrated with the NEPA process described above, in accordance with the Programmatic Agreement Among the National Park Service at Yosemite, the California State Historic Preservation Officer, and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation Regarding Planning, Design, Construction, Operations, and Maintenance, Yosemite National Park, California (NPS 1999) [herein referred to as the 1999 Programmatic Agreement].

Table ES-1
Summary of Alternatives

Alternative 1 No Action	**Actions Common To All Action Alternatives**	**Alternative 2** Rehabilitation of and Improvements to the Roadway, Drainages and Roadside Parking	**Alternative 3** Resurfacing the Roadway Only/ Drainage Improvements
■ Continued routine maintenance, cleaning, and repair work of the roadway and roadside drainages ■ Continued need for pothole and shoulder patchwork ■ Restriction of natural hydrologic flow due to poor condition, size and placement of culverts ■ Impeded hydrologic connectivity from one side of the road to the other affecting adjacent wetlands and sensitive areas ■ Encroachment of brushy vegetation which hinders proper culvert function and compromises their historic integrity ■ Proliferation of informal roadside parking, resulting in a steadily increasing number and size of roadside turnouts and associated impacts to previously undisturbed areas ■ Continued deterioration of river embankment adjacent to the Valley View parking area and near Pohono Bridge	■ Standardization of the roadway to a consistent paved width of 22 feet (10' width lanes and 1' shoulders) where possible ■ Pulverization/recycling of the existing road base and repaving ■ Rehabilitation, replacement and addition of culverts, where needed ■ Regrading of roadside drainage inlets and outlets ■ Enhancement of channel outlets of select culverts with the placement or repair of energy dissipaters ■ Reinforcement of roadside shoulders in select areas ■ Repair of surface damage on the El Capitan Crossover Bridge ■ Removal of five trees (with a diameter of 12" or more) ■ Selective brush clearing along roadway ■ Improvements to accessibility along roadway ■ Installation of utility corridor, which includes a high voltage and communications duct bank and a pipe conduit for future use beneath Southside Drive from Pohono Bridge to Wawona Road Intersection	■ Generally, turnouts that are paved would be repaved. Turnouts that are graveled would be re-graded and graveled with the exception of some improvements to select turnouts (e.g., pave unpaved, remove paved extent). ■ Placement of parking controls (e.g., roadside barriers) around current footprint of select User-designated turnouts ■ Removal of selected turnouts within the River Protection Overlay (RPO) ■ Redistribution of parking within project area and reduction in the Yosemite Valley Parking Inventory by less than 1%. The National Park Service will look for opportunities to accommodate this loss of parking in other future projects, where possible. ■ Installation of a permeable subgrade in select areas (e.g., El Capitan Meadow, Sentinel Creek drainage). Should the National Park Service have funding available for additional locations, then new areas would be identified for similar improvements. ■ Repair and regrouting of approximately 150 feet of river embankment adjacent to the Valley View parking area to maintain integrity of the parking area and pedestrian walkway ■ Placement of stone and restoration of riverbank elevations adjacent to Pohono Bridge to restore an area of non-natural erosion due to poor roadside drainage ■ Improvements to and/or elevation of adjacent pathways where roadway curbing is improved	■ Turnouts that are paved would be repaved. Turnouts that are graveled would be re-graded and graveled. This would result in: no redistribution of current roadside parking locations; no change to current curbing and roadside barriers; no construction of additional parking controls (e.g., roadside barriers) along the roadway or roadside parking areas.